DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 792 CG 023 002

AUTHOR Morris, David C.
TITLE Social Relationships and Perceived Well-Being of Older Adults in Contemporary Middletown.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America (43rd, Boston, MA, November 16-20, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; Community Surveys; Health; Individual Needs; *Life Satisfaction; *Older Adults; *Well Being

ABSTRACT

The general objective of this study was to examine life satisfaction within the milieu of a classic, sociological, community setting: Middletown, U.S.A. Subjects (N=400) were persons, 60 years of age and older, over one-half of whom were married and most of whom had at least one living child. A significant majority of these older Middletowners reported high levels of both life satisfaction and good health. Most appeared to feel that their income was at least adequate for their needs. After examining a large pool of independent variables, a multiple regression analysis revealed that five variables accounted for the vast majority of variance in life satisfaction. Those variables were: subjective health status, the variable with the greatest overall effect; comparative life satisfaction; sufficient contact with a confidant; degree of loneliness; and satisfaction with income. The amount of contact with friends, neighbors, offspring and/or amount of income were not significantly related to differing levels of life satisfaction. The findings tend to confirm the view that it is more often the perception of quality and not necessarily the quantity of social bonds, statuses, and relationships which account for varying degrees of life satisfaction or well-being. (ABL)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED326792

# SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND PERCEIVED WELL-BEING OF OLDER ADULTS IN CONTEMPORARY MIDDLETOWN

DAVID C. MORRIS

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY,
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE OF THE INSTITUTE OF GERONTOLOGY,
AND THE CENTER FOR MIDDLETOWN STUDIES

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, IN 47306

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

David C Morris

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

GERONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA
1990

*This paper may not be quoted or attributed without permission of the author.*

CG023002

## INTRODUCTION

In its broader terms, the area of "subjective well-being" has been and continues to be of considerable interest to gerontologists. Indeed, one of the many facets of this on-going attention is the fact that subjective well-being encompasses a number of definitions, e.g., Morale, Happiness, or Life Satisfaction (George, 1979).

Recently, Chappell and Badger (1989) investigated the impact of social isolation on the perceived well-being of 743 randomly selected persons in Winnipeg, Manitoba. They found that many measures of social isolation, especially those which involve "straight counts" or quantity, are NOT particularly related to well-being; nor was having children. Qualitative measures of companionship or having a confidant, however, ARE related to subjective well-being. They note that major explanatory power is found also in health and perceived adequacy of income.

The general objective of this paper is to examine life satisfaction within the milieu of a classic, sociological, community setting: Middletown, U.S.A. More specifically, much of our interest lies in examining the place of subjective health evaluations, confidant contact, and life satisfaction.

Based on a random sample of 400 persons, 60 years of age and older, after examining a large pool of independent variables, a multiple regression analysis revealed that five variables accounted for the vast majority of variance in life satisfaction. Those variables are: SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS (the variable having the greatest overall effect); COMPARATIVE LIFE

SATISFACTION; SUFFICIENT CONTACT WITH A CONFIDANT; DEGREE OF LONELINESS; AND SATISFACTION WITH INCOME. The multiple correlation coefficient $R = 0.58$; $R^2 = 0.327$.

It is worth noting that amount of contact with friends, neighbors, offspring and/or amount of income were NOT significantly related to differing levels of life satisfaction.

## COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

In terms of general characteristics, most of the sample are married (53 percent) or widowed (36.8 percent). Almost 84 percent have at least one living child. Approximately 75 percent are 60-74 years of age and 62 percent had a high school education or more. Two-thirds of the sample are females and 42.6 percent report household incomes of less than $10,000. The sample ranges between 60 to 93 years of age.

A significant majority of these older Middletowners report high levels of both life satisfaction and good health. Most appear to feel that their income is at least adequate for their needs.

After initially examining a large pool of independent variables, the multiple regression analysis seen in the Table indicates that five variables contributed the most to an explanation of life satisfaction. They are: SUBJECTIVE HEALTH STATUS, which has the most significant effect of all the variables considered; COMPARATIVE LIFE SATISFACTION which is a more temporal measure (that is, we were interested in not only life satisfaction at this point in time, but also in an assessment of now as compared to the past, i.e., young adulthood;

almost 37.0 percent said that they were more satisfied now than when they were young adults, 37.0 percent said about the same, and slightly over 25.0 percent said that they were less satisfied).

The last three variables are SUFFICIENT CONTACT WITH A CONFIDANT; DEGREE OF LONELINESS; and finally INCOME SATISFACTION. The multiple correlation coefficient R = .58; $R^2$ = .327. It is interesting to note that amount of contact with friends and neighbors, and amount of income were not significantly related to life satisfaction.

While the sample, setting, and measures are somewhat different, it appears that these data would tend to add credence to Chappell and Badger's findings. HEALTH STATUS, CONFIDANT CONTACT, LONELINESS, SATISFACTION WITH INCOME, and additionally COMPARATIVE LIFE SATISFACTION make a significant contribution to the subjective well-being of older adults in "middle America." These findings would tend to confirm the view that it is more often the perception of quality and not necessarily the quantity of our social bonds, statuses, and relationships which accounts for varying degrees of life satisfaction or well-being.

**Table: Multiple Regression Analysis of Life Satisfaction**

| VARIABLE | BETA | F | SIG |
|---|---|---|---|
| Subjective Health Status (HELTHNOW) | .308 | 46.11 | <.001 |
| Comparative Life Satisfaction (LIFENOW) | .204 | 19.52 | <.001 |
| Contact with Confidant (SEENOFT) | -.138 | 9.48 | <.01>.001 |
| Degree of Loneliness (LONELY) | -.135 | 7.74 | <.01>.001 |
| Income Satisfaction (SATMON) | .105 | 5.51 | <.05>.01 |

R = .58 $R^2$ = .327

## BIBLIOGRAPHY


Babbie, Earl
1986 The Practice of Social Research, (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1986.

Caplow, Theodore
1982 Middletown Families. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Chappell, N. L. and Badger, M.
1989 "Social Isolation and Well-Being." Journal of Gerontology, 44, S169-176.

Diener, E.
1984 "Subjective Well-Being." Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 95, No. 3, 542-575.

George, L.
1979 "The Happiness Syndrome." The Gerontologist, 19, 210-216.

Hopley, J.
1984 "Life Satisfaction, Happiness, and Morale: Two Problems in the Use of Subjective Well-Being Indicators." The Gerontologist, 24, 124-127.

Hoyt, D. R. and Creech, J. C.
1983 "The Life Satisfaction Index: A Methodological and Theoretical Critique." Journal of Gerontology, 36, 750-752.

Larson, R.
1978 "Thirty Years of Research on the Subjective Well-Being of Older Americans." Journal of Gerontology, 33, 109-125.

Leinbach, R. M.
1982 "Alternatives to the Face-to-Face Interview for Collecting Gerontological Needs Assessment Data." The Gerontologist, 22, 78-82.

Liang, J.
1984 "Dimensions of the Life Satisfaction Index A: A Structural Formulation." Journal of Gerontology, 39, 613-622.

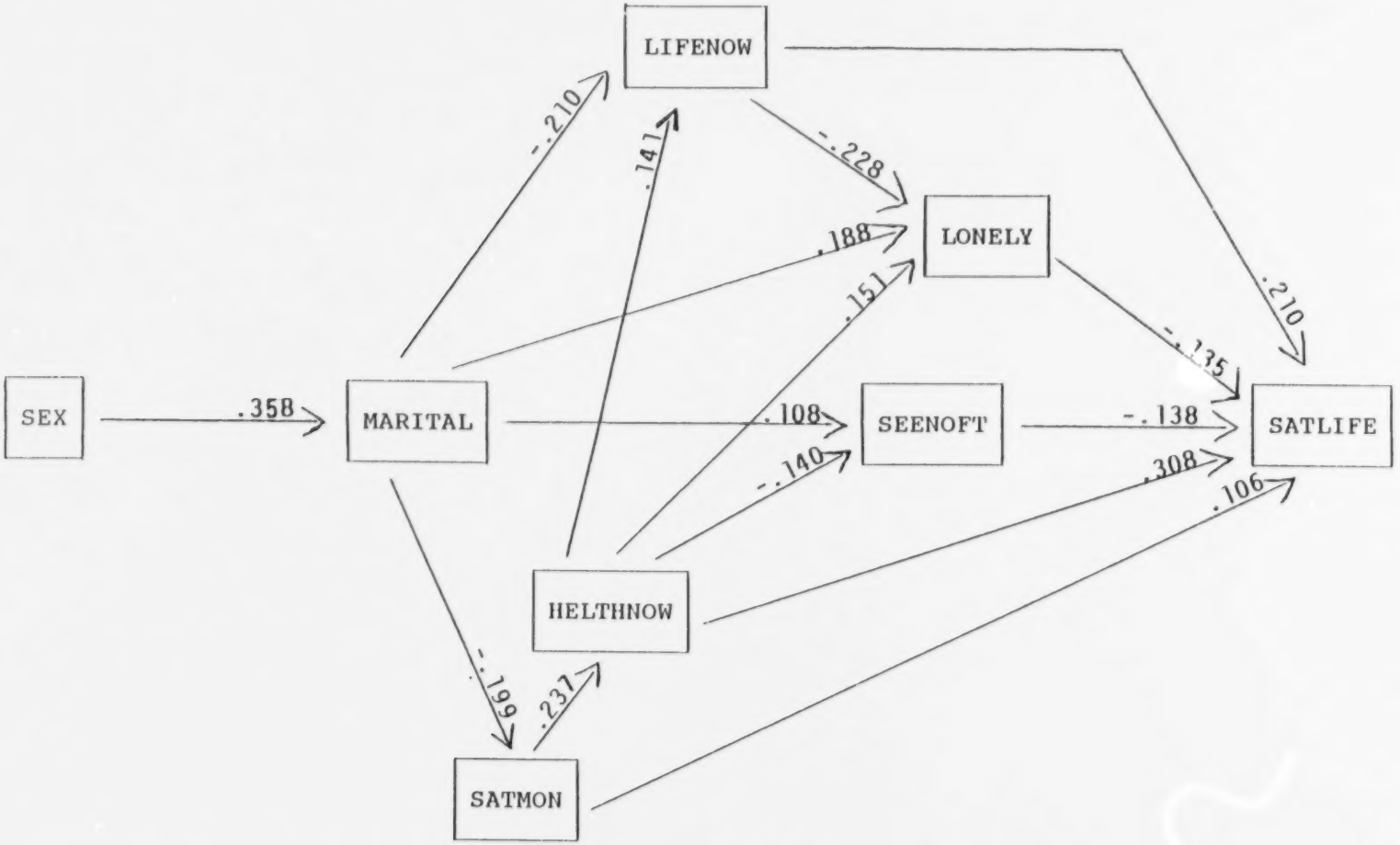
Liang, J., Than V. T., and Markides, K. S.
1988 "Differences in the Structure of Life Satisfaction Index in Three Generations of Mexican Americans." The Journals of Gerontology, 43, S1-S9.

Lynd, Robert S. and Helen M. Lynd
1929 Middletown: A Study in American Culture. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc.

Osberg, J. et al.,
1987 "Life Satisfaction and Quality of Life Among Disabled Elderly Adults." Journal of Gerontology, 42, 228-230.

Usui, W., Keil, T., and Durig, R.
1985 "Socioeconomic Comparisons and Life Satisfaction of Elderly Adults, Journal of Gerontology, 40, 110-114.

Figure 1




R = .5824 $R^2$ = .3390 All Betas Significant at .05 or less